

INTRODUCTION TO THE *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CHILD, YOUTH AND FAMILY STUDIES*, VOLUME ONE, NUMBER ONE AND NUMBER TWO:

REFLECTING ON CRIME PREVENTION AND YOUTH JUSTICE IN CANADA

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Over the past several decades, discussion in Canada about crime and victimization issues can be characterized by two distinct yet polarized views. On the one hand, we have been influenced by the neo-liberal thinking that has dominated the political discourse of most western nations since the early 1980s. In the area of crime and corrections, this has meant an emphasis on “get tough” measures, harsher punishments, and higher incarceration rates. This type of approach has been especially evident in the United States with its “three strikes” policies and its burgeoning prison population. On the other hand, a growing recognition has emerged among social scientists, service providers, and policy-makers that many of the existing and traditional responses to crime – and other social problems – are ineffective. The experience of the United States is often used as an example of this since higher incarceration rates there have not translated into a lower crime rate. Those advocating this perspective contend that a social problem such as crime cannot be understood exclusively in terms of individual motivations and culpability. Instead, crime is seen as part of the broader social context. This has led to a focus on community factors and processes and, ultimately, on the social bases of crime.

These competing philosophies and political orientations have led to the emergence of a number of contradictory policies and practices in the area of criminal justice policy. For example, in Canada, the new youth justice legislation attempts to address the concerns of both conservative and progressive critics by being “tougher” on serious and repeat young offenders while promoting less formal, community-based alternatives for youth involved in first time and minor offences. Similarly, the emphasis over the past decade in the law enforcement field has been on community policing, but at the same time, broad new enforcement powers have been granted to the police in order to combat organized crime, outlaw motorcycle gangs, and terrorism. As these examples show, policy-makers have tried to appease the concerns of those favouring a “get tough” approach while simultaneously responding to those who want to address crime as a broader social problem.

An interesting debate has developed within this context with respect to crime prevention. Beginning in the late 1970s, proponents of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) received considerable support for initiatives such as community safety audits. These were intended to identify areas where the built environment increased the opportunity for crime. This approach to crime prevention emerged at a time when there was a growing emphasis on the identification and management of risk. For crime prevention, this resulted in the attempt to reduce the opportunities for crime by altering the physical environment through increased lighting, and the use of access control measures (locks on doors and bars on windows). Individuals

were encouraged to secure themselves and their property against potential victimization. These CPTED measures – known as situational crime prevention – promoted target hardening on the one hand and self-policing measures on the other, a precursor to the type of “responsibilization” strategies that would emerge later.

At the same time as these more “reactive” initiatives were appearing, more “proactive” crime prevention approaches also began to gain in popularity. Crime Prevention through Social Development (CPSD), for example, explicitly acknowledged the link between crime and underlying social factors such as poverty, unemployment, racism, sexism, and other forms of social marginalization. A growing body of literature began to document the relationship between youth crime and a variety of contextual variables such as: parental criminality, alcoholism, or substance abuse; family conflict; school failure; delinquent peer associations; and a lack of appropriate educational, recreational, and economic opportunities for youth. The response to these underlying social causes of crime was not more policies or programs aimed at individual offenders but, rather, social development initiatives designed to address the underlying social causes of crime.

Looking back, a number of key developments emerged during this era. First, many sectors within criminal justice began to turn to the “community” for a solution. That is, the community began to be perceived as the source of the problem, the site for intervention and, importantly, a participant in service delivery. From the late 1970s onward, these ideas resulted in the development of and growing support for community policing, community corrections, and community-based alternatives such as restorative justice. This mirrored similar developments in other fields with the introduction of community health, community living, and community schools.

Second, concerns over children and youth became a highly visible public policy issue during this period which often influenced broader policy developments. In the criminal justice area, these concerns led to an almost continuous process of legislative change and amendment that has continued for over 30 years. Beginning with a debate over the 78-year-old Juvenile Delinquents Act and its replacement with the Young Offenders Act in 1984, public discussion and debate over youth justice has been at the centre of criminal justice matters in this country.

One of the interesting aspects of both community and childhood is that both concepts have a “taken for granted” quality, yet are difficult to define. There is no simple, widely accepted definition of the concept of community. In fact, this concept is a highly useful policy instrument precisely because of its lack of specificity. Moreover, since it evokes a positive connotation, many observers have invoked it to suit their own needs. The lack of conceptual clarity related to “community” is also there with respect to the concept of childhood. Many scholars have acknowledged the various ways this concept has been used and have begun to explore the consequences that existing “idealized” notions of childhood have for young people. In some contexts, childhood refers to young children. In others, it includes those below the age of majority (defined differently in

different countries). Still others have used the concept of childhood to include people from birth to 30 years of age.

The theoretical and conceptual issues surrounding the concepts of community and childhood informed the development of this collection of original essays. We invited a number of recognized experts concerned about crime prevention and community safety for children and youth to submit their original work in this area. Part I begins with two introductory chapters authored by Michel Vallée that provide a conceptual overview of crime prevention and community safety in Canada. In Chapter Three, Rick Linden presents a rationale for supporting an evidence-based approach to crime prevention. This is followed in Chapter Four by a consideration of the role of the police in relation to crime prevention by Tullio Caputo and Michel Vallée.

Part II, which will appear in April, 2010, includes a discussion of some of the key issues related to children, youth, and their families within a community safety context. It illustrates some of the innovative ideas of key Canadian experts working in this area. Chapter 5 by Mike Boyes, Joe Hornick, and Nancy Ogden, and Chapter 6 by Sibylle Artz, Diana Nicholson, Elaine Halsall, and Susan Larke, examine responses related to the child welfare and protection system. In Chapter 7, Yasmin Jiwani, Ann Cameron, and Helene Berman focus on the “girl child” while in Chapter 8, Bernard Schissel reports on his research with Aboriginal youth and the justice system. Chapter 9 by Susan Reid addresses issues related to children and youth and the criminal justice system. Finally, in Chapter 10, Sylvie Hamel, Marie-Marthe Cousineau, and Sophie Léveillée, in collaboration with Martine Vézina, and Julie Savignac, discuss the implications stemming from a major youth gang prevention project implemented in Montréal. In the Epilogue, we reflect on some of the issues raised in the volume and consider their implications for criminal justice policy and research on children and youth in Canada.